



"*Miss Saigon* is a big show with a big company, and I had to evoke every aspect of the fall of Saigon, from the background of sleazy clubs and hotels, to the sheer desperation of people needing to escape. Like any other story, this one boils down to three or four protagonists. Consequently, I've tried to achieve a balance between the epic and the intimate, so we can focus it down onto the relationships and then open it out to take in more spectacular action."

Drawing on his experience designing opera at Glyndebourne and Covent Garden, Napier approached *Miss Saigon* much more as an opera than as a musical. "I wanted a background that glows and shimmers as the music swells — one that feels the music and reflects it, rather than just providing a setting for a lot of people to sing on."

"The show has about 25 different scenes," Napier says, "so its locations are constantly shifting. I've tried to center things around one basic design — that's the way in which I often work, as I primarily use space as a sculptor rather

than as a painter. It's the idea of bringing objects to the space that interests me.

"Basically, the set consists of a big box of gauzes and other things that are brought to the stage space to identify what is happening. I hope they operate as part of the rhythm of the whole thing, rather than as effects in their own right. They come in from every direction. I very rarely use much scenery, but this time the wings of the theatre are absolutely jammed with the stuff.

"The technical side of things involves a lot of hydraulics, but the audience won't see any of them. There are 38 different hydraulic functions, in fact, and they all work off one big manually operated desk, where you just punch in the configurations you want or work them from joysticks.

"Viewed from the auditorium, it looks like a plain, simple raked stage, but underneath it is a subterranean mass of conduits, oil-flow pipes, winches, limit-switches, and so on. So it's pretty complex down below, but relatively simple up on

stage. It certainly doesn't look mechanical to the audience. We use film projection at one point, not as anything other than graphic information as part of the storytelling — original footage of real, harrowing events."

Compared to his previous designs, which have ranged from the ancient Greek classic to the modern mega-musical, Napier regards *Miss Saigon* as the most naturalistic work he has done for many years. "Most of my recent designs have been rather joyful artifice, like *Time*, or epic tales, like *Les Misérables*, which allow a large degree of poetic license. With *Miss Saigon*, I had to make each situation that the characters find themselves in first and foremost realistic, which is extremely challenging. I had to find a way of creating the right atmosphere for each scene, and that's not something that can be done on this show with one chair and a set of blacks.

"What we've tried to get is a more documentary type of realism. There are several coups that take place in the course